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New Soviet arms move afoot?

US ambassador sees signs of Kremlin shift on 'star wars'

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Moscow seems to be gearing up for another effort to reach an arms control agreement.

Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev will address the participants of an international forum "for a nuclear-free world" next Monday, and outgoing United States Ambassador Arthur Hartman told journalists yesterday that the speech may include new proposals on arms control.

No details of any new proposals have been divulged, but to have any chance of moving the talks out of their present stalemate, they would have to include the main obstacle to an agreement, President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI, or "star wars").

At last October's summit in Reykjavik, Iceland, Mr. Gorbachev offered a major package of concessions in return for a US commitment to abide by the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty for 10 years. In the Soviet view, this commitment would mean that SDI development would be restricted to the laboratory for the duration of the ABM Treaty. Mr. Reagan rejected this proposal, and disarmament talks have since been deadlocked.

The Soviets refuse to break up their package of concessions without a compromise on star wars. Washington says that SDI is nonnegotiable, but that it is interested in other parts of the package.

Ambassador Hartman told reporters here yesterday that Soviet scientists had recently demonstrated a "creative way of looking at SDI" in talks with US visitors. This new approach seemed to relate particularly to the issue of SDI research and development within the limits of the ABM Treaty. The creativity may be connected to the dry-sounding but highly important issue of what constitutes a laboratory.

In Iceland, US officials say, they were led to believe that the

Soviets defined a laboratory in the strict sense of the word - a structure with four walls. Since then, US officials say, the Soviets have informally offered more-flexible definitions.

The Washington-based Committee for National Security recently came up with another possible compromise on SDI. A working group of the committee, including former disarmament negotiator Paul Warnke and former US central intelligence director William Colby, proposed that space-based "kill mechanisms" against objects in space be strictly prohibited. On the other hand, the group said, tests

of space-based sensor systems should generally be allowed.

The crucial unanswered question at this point in arms control is: How badly does Moscow need an agreement?

Many Western observers, among them US officials, feel that Moscow has to choose either economic development or military growth. The Soviets say that Washington is trying to debilitate them economically by forcing them into an arms race. But they say that the US premise is wrong: If necessary they could compete. Moreover, they say, anti-SDI measures would be cheaper and simpler to develop than SDI itself.

Calculations carried out by Western economists suggest that the truth lies somewhere in between these positions. A study presented at a recent NATO seminar suggests that a major reduction in Soviet defense spending would act as a sort of insurance policy that would guarantee the achievement of the ambitious growth rates for the current five-year plan. The study estimates that a decrease in the growth of defense machinery output from its currently estimated level of 8.5 percent a year to 4 percent would allow the Soviet economy to achieve

the growth levels envisaged under the five-year plan, even without any major improvements in productivity.

The Soviets feel that the Reagan administration is also under pressure. They are pinning their hopes partly on the new Democratic-controlled Congress and partly on the reaction of Reagan's West European allies toward SDI. Recent statements by Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger about the possibility of an early deployment of star wars - an act that would spell the end of the ABM Treaty - have worried even staunch US allies such as Britain.